

### **A PREPARATION MYSTERY: WHY SOME SUCCEED AND OTHERS FAIL**

If leadership education programs are improving, then why do some of our graduates fail in leading schools and districts even as others succeed? The relationship between what is taught in graduate leadership education programs and the daily practices of school administrators is a conundrum. Some critics claim that the course content in leadership education graduate programs is too theoretical and holds little relevance in the practical world of administering America's schools. Others call for the closure of some of these programs and support only a few highly regulated institutions or agencies that prepare the "best and brightest" for the roles of principal and superintendent (Levine, 2005; Sanders, 2005). Still other observers believe that university preparation of school principals and superintendents has never been better. Their beliefs are centered on admissions criteria calling for stronger grade point averages, higher scores on entrance examinations, stronger attention to ethnic and gender diversity, and greater emphasis on preparing leaders for social justice (Hoyle 2005a; Young, Creighton, Crow, Orr, & Ogawa, 2005). In addition, researchers are finding better ways to teach prospective school leaders about the positive links between school leadership and student performance (Leithwood, 2004; Jackson & Kelly, 2002; Orr, 2006a). This diversity of opinions suggests that the relationship between graduate leadership education and actual school practices remains unclear.

Recent criticisms of leadership education programs (Levine, 2005; Sanders, 2005; Murphy & Vriesenga, 2004) have spurred scholars to balance the criticisms with examples of successful university leadership education programs. Jerome Murphy (2006) describes multiple problems with leadership preparation but observes that the situation is not as dire as some vocal critics surmise. Murphy contends that a number of leadership preparation programs are better than critics suggest, though he acknowledges that "some schools of education are slow stepping elephants when it comes to leadership education" (p. 490). The pressures to improve leadership education have never been greater due to widespread calls for reform of public education. The calls for reform require better prepared principals and superintendents. Notable efforts are underway to upgrade leadership education by building on the strengths of the past and extending the "call for new blood, stronger content, more relevance and higher quality" (Murphy, 2006, p. 490). Terry Orr (2006b) contends that some of the criticism is earned and some is not. She records notable innovations in leadership education led by the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA), the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA), and numerous preparation programs across the country.

Orr (2006b) finds that leadership education programs are striving for “a deeper understanding of the role of leadership not just as an instrument of school improvement, but also as a means of promoting social justice and democracy” (p. 498). Murphy, Orr, and other observers express the urgency to improve the leadership education image by stressing careful selection of graduate students, rigorous curriculum and course content, greater varieties of relevant field experiences, and more extensive preparation in student learning and classroom environments that lead to higher performing students.

Yet, in spite of the promising improvements in leadership preparation programs, some graduates succeed and others fail. Why is this? As one way to answer this question, this study explores the preparation, careers, and success or failure of two superintendents prepared in top tier university leadership preparation doctoral programs. Its underlying purpose is to discern whether there is anything else leadership preparation programs can learn and do differently so as to assure the success of all their graduates.

### **Research Methods**

In keeping with the naturalistic method (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993), the researcher served as the primary instrument for gathering data about two superintendents, Robert and Sue. The researcher was familiar with their doctoral course work at two different well recognized universities and with their professional development experiences as practicing superintendents. He interviewed them about their careers, observed their district staff meetings, analyzed their student test score data compiled on high-stakes state tests, and reviewed their student attendance records, teacher turnover records, newsletters, and local newspaper accounts of board meetings. In addition, the author conducted seminars in each district that included teachers, administrators, and community members in conversations about district policy, beliefs about students, and district culture. Through persistent observation by this writer of the events over a period of five years and data gathering processes to insure consistency, the scenarios were written. Care was taken to obscure the identity of each superintendent and key personnel interviewed during the research project.

The scenarios, presented in narrative form, tell the story of Robert’s and Sue’s experiences in their doctoral programs and their career paths to and in the superintendent position they each held during the time period of this study. In addition, the scenarios detail their respective districts’ demographics, wealth, staff, programs, governance, and issues of accountability. They also include the performance standards used by the respective school boards for annual evaluations of Robert and Sue. The evaluation process is followed, with the discovery of which superintendent’s contract was not renewed and who received a three year contract extension. Finally, conclusions are drawn speculating about the success of one superintendent and

the job loss of the other. In addition the author identifies some of the gaps in leadership preparation standards and leadership education that affected the success and failure of the school leaders presented in the scenarios.

### **Two Successful Superintendents**

Robert and Sue were hired as superintendents of very similar school districts. Robert and Sue are intelligent, high achieving school superintendents with extensive experience as classroom teachers and as campus and central office administrators. They earned doctorates from top ranked university preparation programs where they studied school improvement, issues of social justice, leadership and organizational theory, research methods, and instructional systems. They completed projects on school finance, school law, facility planning, curriculum development and assessment, policy, and political science. Their respective dissertations on school leadership and student performance won recognition by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA). Also, they scored at the top of the scale on their superintendent certification exam based on national superintendent standards. Both guided their school districts to student test-score performance that was above the state average. In addition both embedded themselves into the social fabric of their communities with memberships in civic clubs, the Chamber of Commerce, and United Way campaigns. Both Robert and Sue were assured by the board of education and community leaders that they were conducting themselves as exemplary school and community leaders.

#### *Robert's Superintendency*

Robert's suburban school district of 76,000 people had a student enrollment of 15,300 with an average district wealth that amounted to \$6,840 supporting the education of each student. The district economy was driven by a large state university, ranching, farming, and light high-tech industry. The demographics of his district were 45% Anglo, 28% African American, 20% Hispanic, 4% Asian/Pacific Islanders, and 3% Native American. While 45% of the student body came from lower income families, only 28% were entitled to a free or reduced-price lunch. Student dropout rates were moderate and had dropped from 9% to 3% in the last three years. Robert inherited a faculty with a low turnover rate of under 3%, with an average of nine years teaching in the district and salaries slightly above the state average. In addition only one campus principal and no central office administrators had been added in the four years prior to Robert's appointment. Student test scores for the Anglo and Asian students were above state average while the African American and Hispanic scores were below the state average. The primary reason the school board unanimously selected Robert was because of his detailed, child-centered

plan to raise test scores for all children in the district. He won the job over two high profile candidates because of his excellent plan and his passion for improving the academic performance of minority and poor students. After his interview one school board member commented, "He won our hearts that night when he promised to improve student performance, one precious child at a time."

During August of his first year, Robert contracted with two nationally known consultants to conduct a week-long seminar for his leadership team, which consisted of all campus and central office administrators. The seminar focused on creating vision and mission statements, aligning curriculum with instruction and testing, and improving already high district and community morale. He told his team that "This is a new and exciting era for kids in the district to be the best they can be." In addition, Robert visited leaders of community Hispanic and African American cultural and religious groups, joined the Rotary Club, and was appointed to the boards of the Chamber of Commerce and United Way. He also placed membership with a prominent church in the community. Furthermore, beginning his second year, Robert was elected to the advisory board of the state association of school superintendents and became a popular speaker around the state on school reform. During his first year he was very visible on every campus and in many classrooms, and during the next three years he visited with individual staff members in each building once a week.

Beginning Robert's second year, the school board commended him for an improvement in student test scores and a decrease in the number of school dropouts. However, the board challenged Robert to seek ways to bring the performance of African American and Hispanic students above the state average and equal with the scores in similar districts in the state. Robert felt the pressure to make those improvements and with board approval created a new executive position and recruited a colleague from his former district to become a candidate for the position of assistant superintendent for school improvement. Robert announced the position in the proper time frame and interviewed two of his current principals and a central office administrator who formally applied for the position. They were disappointed when the outsider was chosen for the position. The new hire began her new position by focusing on the problems of African American, Hispanic, and low income student test scores and provided "targeted" workshops with all faculty, site-based teams, and curriculum coordinators in math, reading, and social studies. The African American and Hispanic test scores improved the next year and all indicators pointed to additional improvement for the next testing period. Robert and his assistant superintendent presented to the board their new district vision statement, "What ever it takes—improve one-child-at-a-time."

Within his third year Robert had improved the academic rigor of middle and high school curriculum and added several advanced placement courses acceptable at the local university. Robert continued his weekly

visits to each campus and maintained his high visibility in the community with minority groups, university administrators and faculty, and charitable organizations. The good news was that in Robert's fourth year the district test scores for African American and Hispanic students surpassed the state averages in reading and social studies; however, they remained below average in math and science. In April of his fourth year his best middle school principal received a job offer to open a new high school as principal in a nearby suburb and he informally accepted before informing Robert. Robert was upset that his counterpart in the nearby district would steal his prize principal away and told the principal that he would not release him from his contract until he found a replacement. After several weeks, Robert decided to release his star principal and hired an interim for the remainder of the school year. In July, after interviewing two in-district middle school assistant principals, Robert hired a bright young assistant principal from another district to become the permanent principal. In addition, Robert worked with the Dean of the nearby College of Education to begin planning a new academic high school that would implement the International Baccalaureate curriculum. The planning process gained considerable media coverage for Robert and the Dean.

Robert believed that he had done the right things to meet school board expectations detailed in his performance goals for district improvements in each of his four years and was eager to begin another year as the superintendent. Robert was so sure of his continuation he called his major professor and informed her about his successes and asked for advice on several personnel and budgeting issues. He told his professor that it appeared that his contract would be renewed based primarily on the improvements in minority student test scores and his rapport with the community. Robert thanked his professor for all she had taught him and walked toward the board room optimistic that the board would renew his contract for another three year term.

### *Sue's Superintendency*

Sue, the second superintendent, was hired by the school board from among five finalists. The board was impressed with the student test scores in her previous district and her prior experience in banking and finance. The city consists of 52,000 people with a student enrollment of 11,600. The demographics in the district are 34% Hispanic, 22% African American, 36% Anglo, 6% Asian, and 3% Native American. The economy is driven by ranching, farming, a large prison system, and a state university. However, the cooperation between the public school district and university was minimal. State "high stakes" test scores for Anglo, African American, Hispanic, and Asian students from middle to upper income households were near the state averages. However, students from lower income families scored below the state average and were below the scores

of similar districts in the state. The school board wanted this record of mediocrity to cease.

Sue faced numerous challenges when she was hired. The school board and other community leaders challenged her to bring the district to the state averages in three years and create more college preparatory classes and Advanced Placement classes in math and writing. She faced a dropout rate of 24% among Hispanic and 9% among African American students. The district wealth was similar to Robert's district at \$6,900 per student with teachers' salaries at the state average and teacher turnover rate at 6%. Sue was appointed on a 5-2 split vote by the board because two of them wanted to hire their own current assistant superintendent for finance and business. Sue was hired in late July which left little time to plan for a leadership team retreat during the first two weeks of August. However, she arranged a leadership staff meeting held in a university conference center supplied by the Dean of the College of Education whom Sue had met at a national conference during her student days. To begin the meeting, Sue shared her vision for the district's future success and asked her leadership team for help in leading the schools to where they needed to be and sought ideas on building community support for the schools. She asked them to help to her identify 90 individuals in the community who were perceived as leaders to form a new "Council for Excellence."

Every year of Sue's employment in the district, on the first day of school she visits every classroom and shakes hands with every classroom teacher. She begins her marathon at 7:00 am and ends at 4:30 pm. In addition, during the first week she delivers a state-of-the district speech to the local ministerial alliance, at a different church or synagogue each year. Furthermore, during her first year, the 90 members of the Council of Excellence met for five months and produced seven belief statements and vision and mission statements. The school board approved the statements and accepted them as guides for all district decisions for the next five years.

Beginning Sue's second year she appointed a curriculum task force to create a standards-based curriculum for PK-12 based on the new vision, beliefs, and district mission. The curriculum was aligned with the state testing objectives and national standards in each content area. These alignments were compatible with the measurable goals emerging from the district five-year plan for excellence. The Council of Excellence proved to be very influential in creating a visionary plan for the schools, and Sue was praised by the entire community for her leadership with the board and her devotion to helping all students succeed. Sue asked the Council of 90 to remain intact through the next five years to help assure that the district vision came true. The Council of Excellence, the school board, and Sue challenged the community and all students to expect excellence in the years to come.

During Sue's fourth school year the district ran a budget deficit and she recommended to the board that two central office jobs be eliminated. One of the assistants was a veteran African American woman who



was not ready to retire and refused to be “demoted” to campus administrator. After considerable feedback from community leaders, central office staff, and school board members, Sue asked for her resignation and helped plan a community-wide retirement reception for the long-time employee. However, the dismissal created criticism of the board and Sue. The school board, the Council of Excellence, and a local newspaper editor expressed their support for Sue. Another decision Sue made was to encourage a veteran Anglo male who came through the coaching and teaching ranks and served as director of curriculum to retire early and to delegate his curriculum duties to the director of student assessment. During that fourth year, test scores across all grade levels and ethnic groups improved considerably and the dropout rate dropped from 24% to 9% for Hispanics and to 3% for the others. Sue continued to communicate the district vision throughout the community and told every audience that the district would make “no excuses” when a child did not succeed in the district. Moreover, she informed the board that within two years the district curriculum plan would be updated by adding dual credit high school credits acceptable at the local university.

Based on her leadership preparation research and advice from a former professor, within three years Sue’s district benchmarks for teaching and learning were emerging as the model for other districts struggling with low achievement among poor and minority students. Sue’s vision was relentless as she maintained constant pressure on the administrative and teaching staff to seek excellence and higher test performance by all students in the district. While Sue continued to stress improving test scores, she also reminded the board and community that the “whole child” must be educated along with the demands for higher student test score performance. As the end of her fourth school year approached, Sue leaned back in her office chair and felt confident that the board would renew her contract later that evening. She felt the district was on its way to reaching the dream of every student succeeding in school and in life. Sue reflected on the quality of her leadership education during her doctoral studies and other professional development that had guided her leadership practices as school superintendent.

### **What Robert and Sue Knew About Leadership**

Robert and Sue had been exposed to leadership research during their graduate studies and more recently in superintendent academies, conventions, and seminars. They had heard the tired question: Are leaders born or made? Both were aware of issues about leaders’ temperament, intellect, persistence, and values and why some individuals with great leadership potential never succeed and why others who appear to have limited leadership skills accomplish great things. They participated in frequent discussions about leaders’ charisma, gender, race, and physical attributes of

strength and size and why some individuals perform better under pressure. They realized that some leaders adjust to situations better than others, some are better test takers, others are more reflective, some leaders have an inner sense of when and how to act under pressure and to guide decision making that is best for the students. They were familiar with writings of scholars about service leadership and serving a cause beyond oneself (Glickman, 1993; Sergiovanni, 2006; Hoyle, 2007; Fullen, 2005; Leithwood, Aitken, & Jantzi, 2006) and the post-structural issues of redefining leadership as an ontology using art, politics, and culture (English, 1993).

Robert and Sue learned that styles of leadership are changing from forcing others to comply to modeling the way for others through the use of empowerment, collaboration, persuasion, professional development, and encouragement. They learned that changes in administrative leadership were influenced by the Civil Rights Movement supported by the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* decision, women's rights, and legislation for the handicapped, and increased pleas for social justice in our legal, corporate, and educational systems. These movements raised the awareness of the injustices suffered by women, people of color, and those caught in the web of poverty. Robert and Sue were taught that efforts to provide equal opportunities to oppressed individuals have influenced political leaders, educational administrators, and community leaders to reconsider a personal obligation toward inclusion of others in sharing power and resources. Both Robert and Sue attempted to demonstrate a more transformational and moral leadership style in an effort to lead others toward greater organizational productivity by preparing and empowering others in their districts to take personal responsibility in assuring quality in the entire district. This leadership style is the primary reason for high performing schools at all levels (Waters, 2007; Leithwood, 2004). However, today's superintendents, including Robert and Sue, are caught between the high expectations for student test performance by school boards, state departments of education, and the U.S. Department of Education (NCLB) and the efforts to be a child-centered and caring learning community for each child and youth. Caught in this twenty-first century high stakes, test-driven education system, both Robert and Sue were taught to demonstrate a strong sense of caring for all team members if they expect to meet the high expectations of society and to prepare young people with the character to promote social justice for all people.

Martha McCarthy (2001) and other professors are striving to insure the success of Robert, Sue, and other practicing and aspiring superintendents by (a) providing credible evidence that informs practitioners, scholars, and policymakers regarding the effectiveness of leadership preparation programs, and (b) deciding whether the standards being adopted for school administrators are the right ones, and, if so, how these should be assessed. Researchers have conducted limited but descriptive research that reveals graduates' satisfaction with the skills and knowledge taught



to Robert, Sue, and others in their graduate programs. Graduate students at the University of Missouri (Hatley, Arrendondo, Donaldson, Short, & Updike, 1996) and Texas A&M University (Hoyle & Oates, 2000) reported that their graduate programs were very instrumental in helping them to prepare for and succeed on the job. Other graduates reported a clear, well defined curriculum focus reflecting agreement on the relevant knowledge base needed for school administrators in their first year, or first few years, in the profession (Zimmerman, Bowman, Valentine, & Barnes, 2004). Professors at other institutions found that graduates became more scholarly in their approach to problem-solving, which helped them to solve the real world problems of administration. Researchers at the University of Colorado found that their graduates were prepared to integrate reliable formal knowledge with clinical knowledge—theoretical and craft knowledge (Martin, Ford, Murphy, & Muth, 1998). Successful graduates of six of the top ranked leadership education doctoral programs reported that their doctoral experiences were “Extremely Relevant” to their leadership as principals and superintendents (Hoyle & Torres, 2007). Thus, while the evidence about the success of leadership preparation may be limited, it does suggest some important movement toward improvements that prepare leaders to manage pressures created by high stakes testing and to survive the political demands of their position.

Robert and Sue learned about empowering others to sustain productive learning communities. They were taught by their professors that superintendents must meet accountability demands while striving to assure that every teacher is treated as a professional colleague. They learned that if a superintendent relies on “teacher proof curriculum” or exhibits a patriarchal model of leadership, little progress is made in terms of student performance and teacher morale. According to Linda McNeil (2000), in administrator “controlled” schools it is very unlikely that student performance will improve much because teachers are placed in a position of obedience and only teach what they are told to teach. Robert and Sue knew to avoid making teachers fearful of teaching “outside the box” and become resigned merely to doing the job and nothing more. It appears that both Robert and Sue were prepared to avoid the “boss” model and move toward a shared strategy with the teaching staff because they learned that experimentation and creative approaches to student mastery would give them as superintendents greater power as leaders and respect as individuals.

### **School Board Evaluations of Robert and Sue**

Evaluating superintendent job performance remains more art than science. School boards tend to evaluate their superintendents in one or two ways: (a) informal, inconsistent observations of their human relations and budgeting skills, and (b) formal assessment of observable and non-observable management functions (Brown & Irby, 1997). The informal models

continue today, especially in small rural school districts with perhaps only a passing interest in a continuous professional improvement plan for the superintendent. The formal assessment method has proven helpful in school board appraisal of superintendents' performance. Assessments are based on a combination of national preparation standards, board expectations for the superintendent, and job descriptions (Hoyle, Bjork, Collier, & Glass, 2005).

Both Robert and Sue were evaluated by the school board using both formal and informal methods after the end of their fourth year of employment. The decisions to extend one contract for another three years and deny the other were based on the following evaluation processes. Both boards agreed that Robert and Sue met the criteria for respective job descriptions, and, with minor exceptions, both met job expectations for the four years. However, the final decision to renew or not renew appears to originate from data collected on the standards-based Superintendent Executive Assessment Model (SEAM) (Hoyle et al., 2005, pp. 217-219). This model and the book it derives from are based on the standards and indicators first created by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and then adapted by The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) and The National Council for the Accreditation of Colleges of Education (NCATE). The eight standards on which superintendents are assessed are:

1. Executive vision and shaping district culture
2. Executive leadership in societal and school board governance issues
3. Executive leadership and internal and external communication
4. Executive leadership and managing resources
5. Executive leadership and curriculum
6. Executive leadership and instructional management
7. Executive leadership and personnel management
8. Executive leadership and personal values and ethics

Within each of the eight standards, five to seven specific skill indicators are included. The maximum score on each standard is ten points. Thus, the maximum score on the instrument is 80. Both Robert and Sue were pleased with the point total on their evaluations and assumed that they had the confidence of the board members. The evaluation point results were private information not available to the researcher.

Who was dismissed? Robert and Sue led their respective districts to higher student performance within four years. Robert fulfilled his promise to raise test scores for all children and create higher expectations for the district. He met the job expectations for the four year period and met the criteria of the job description. In addition, Robert was satisfied with the scores his school board gave him on the SEAM performance instrument. Sue also clearly met her board's performance objectives and the job

description criteria. She successfully led the district in test score improvement and in decreasing the number of dropouts. In addition the board gave her credit for building greater rigor in the curriculum and in classroom instruction. Since both Robert and Sue met their job expectations, respective job descriptions, and were pleased with their performance evaluations, why weren't both of them retained and given a three year contract extension?

Robert's contract was not renewed after the four year period. Sue was awarded a three year extension to her contract that included a merit pay increase. The board's reason for non-renewal of Robert's contract was "breakdowns in communications" and the "drop in district morale." According to Robert, the reasons for the morale drop were not clearly detailed in the board's report, but the report described how the district morale began to fall when Robert brought in an outsider for the assistant superintendent job. The morale problem was manifest in complaints to the board by the overlooked insiders that their applications and interviews were not given serious attention by Robert. The board felt that Robert did not provide them with a strong rationale for bringing in the assistant superintendent. This problem was compounded by hiring another outsider for the middle school principal position. At the time of the new hires, the board wanted to support Robert in finding the best persons to help him improve district performance, but they were concerned that employees with long ties to the district were not given stronger consideration for the posts. They had been assured by Robert that both outside and inside applicants had undergone the same rigorous review. Also, some board members perceived that Robert may have by-passed board policy by not following a more systematic selection process. Robert found out months later that two of the board members attended the same church as two of the insiders overlooked by the superintendent.

Sue, on the other hand, created a strong support system and considerable community good will by selecting the 90 member "Council of Excellence" during her first year. The extensive vision building developed unity among members of the Council of Excellence and the school board. Thus, the board approved her recommendation for a budget reduction that included removing some "dead wood" in the central administration. These dismissals were viewed by the board as necessary to follow the new beliefs/vision/mission statements that would set the course for the next five years. Even though Sue's board felt that the dismissals could have been handled more diplomatically and caused less turmoil, they supported recommendations based on the shared vision of excellence in the district.

### **Performance Standards Are Imperfect**

While the AASA/ISLLC/NCATE administrator standards are accepted guidelines for university preparation, professional development, and performance evaluation, they are not infallible (Hoyle, 2005b). The

standards are limited in measuring the interpersonal, political, and morale issues endemic to all who serve as superintendents. Based on the evidence about the leadership performance of Robert and Sue over four years, the one standard focusing on personnel (#7) appeared to be the catalyst for the board to determine Robert's future in the district. Even though the district test scores improved during each of Robert's four years as superintendent, and he provided evidence of efforts to increase student performance in each school, his personnel decisions appear to be the tipping point that lost internal support from key district employees. Robert's leadership style built strong coalitions with businesses and community agencies, implemented special instructional programs and staff development, and achieved some celebrity status in the press and in education circles as a state leader in school reform. Unfortunately, for a myriad of reasons spinning from the personnel selections, trust between the majority of the board and Robert declined beyond repair. The buyout of Robert's contract agreement cited "philosophical differences" as the reason for his departure. When a superintendent's contract is not renewed, the news releases rarely state that the superintendent lacked leadership, curriculum, budgeting skills, or interpersonal skills. The most common reason given by the board to the press after a non-renewal of a superintendent's contract is "differences between the board and the superintendent over the direction to take the district." The board told Robert that there were "breakdowns" in the communication process between him and the board members. Thus, the reality of politics is inescapable even in an attempt to create research-driven superintendent evaluation standards.

The superintendency is a highly political job and even the best standards-based evaluation system cannot resolve some political differences. As an unidentified superintendent quoted by Robert Blumberg (1985) emphatically put it: "It's political, highly political. In graduate school we took a course on the politics of education. What a joke. The whole {expletive} thing is political" (p. 85). It appears that Robert lost his job due to political processes beyond his control. But Robert also did not read all of the signs that led to a drop in district morale, and he had limited awareness of issues of interpersonal and political infighting. He could have been better prepared to scan and monitor the cultural and historical community power structures. These survival skills were lacking in Robert's leadership education. Had they been nurtured, he might have been able to avoid the "breakdown in communication" and prevent the other political events from costing him his job.

## **Conclusions**

It is safe to conclude that many leadership preparation programs are striving to improve each year. However, whether, and if so how, they can guarantee job security for the school leaders they prepare remains an open

and complex question. Had Robert been better prepared during his course work, internship, and mentoring to listen and watch for warning signs about the decline of morale among his administrative team and individual board members, he may have had his contract renewed. Preparing school leaders to be better listeners and to empower their advisory teams to help manage agreement and disagreement is being done by some graduate programs but needs expansion into professional development and other training programs. The addition of these real world skills of survival would assist graduates in anticipating related morale or interpersonal issues that can harm communications and thwart the mission of schools and school districts.

While some superintendent preparation and licensure programs are disjointed and unrelated to successful practice, others are well conceived and respected and deliver programs resting on a theory-base guided by research on school improvement, student learning, and systems of accountability. Robert and Sue knew and applied the latest ideas to promote higher student and teacher performance. Above all Robert and Sue attempted to establish a student-centered and caring learning environment and demonstrated their leadership skills gained in leadership education and successful practice. However, the key was in their individual leadership styles and how to observe, reflect, and act on the interpersonal politics with staff, school board, and community.

Leadership educators must seek answers as to why some of our graduates fail to succeed as school administrators. Given high quality doctoral programs such as those Sue and Robert went through, this mystery can be solved only by improving the knowledge and skill levels in the political and interpersonal domains of district-wide leadership and by providing future leaders with greater insights into school board-superintendent relations and evaluation procedures. In addition, frequent well-conceived simulation games and role playing provide successful alternatives for helping school leaders to anticipate and manage the human dimensions of school administration.

In the final analysis, all leadership theory and practice centers on interpersonal relationships and the skills needed to scan and work with the political environment and the cultural values and history of the community and the school district. What if Robert had invited individual school board members to breakfast each week and asked for input about community concerns, the schools, and his own performance? This strategy saved the career of another veteran superintendent who was concerned that his contract would not be renewed. He invited his most likely adversary to breakfast and told her how much he appreciated her work for every student in the district and asked her how they could work more closely to improve the schools. This one gesture of reaching out to create a better personal relationship eased tensions, and the superintendent's contract was renewed in the next board meeting. This is one example of why leadership preparation programs need greater emphasis on the interpersonal side of leadership.

While the interpersonal and political domain needs greater attention in the preparation sequence, it remains a mystery what the proper balance is of the most vital skills and knowledge to prepare school leaders who can avoid dismissal. We may never know why two individuals prepared in two of the best leadership preparation programs were not both successful and given equal support by their school boards. After Robert's dismissal he left the superintendency to pursue other interests. Sue continues to lead her district to higher student performance and has strong support from the school board and the community. The dynamics of school leadership are complex, but the search for answers must never wane in leadership preparation if we hope to prepare our graduates with the skills to scan, monitor, and act in political environments for the educational good of all our children.

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